

ANNETTE.

By HARRIET J. BOWLES.

It was in the year 1806, on the road from Bretagne, that a post-chaise enveloped in a cloud of dust, was observed to make a sudden halt, and two gentlemen, in the garb of military officers, descended therefrom; one of them addressed a few words to the postillion who had accompanied them, in which he desired him to return to the town from whence he had started, as farther progress was impracticable to a carriage of this description, and the travellers proposed to accomplish the remainder of the journey on foot. They were proceeding to the Château de Kerlay, and the officer, previous to commencing the route, with which he was but little acquainted, made the necessary inquiries of their conductor.

“Yes, worthy Colonel,” replied the man of the thong, in a tone of respectful familiarity, “I will proceed to enlighten thee on the subject the task is easy—you see yonder village so thickly studded with white cottages; well, then, thou must proceed through it my Colonel, then onward half a league in advance, and you will encounter a second village, and rising before thee will be seen the Chateau de Kerlay. If, by any chance,” added this loquacious guide, “thou should’st mistake the way, forget not to inquire, and you will find the country people very glad to set thee right for two grand gentlemen as you are.”

“Ah! my friend,” replied one of the travellers, “you are but a sample of your honest class, ever ready to give the fullest information for value received. Well, here my good fellow, here is a noble for thee—begone. The postillion tendered his congé, remounted his sorry horse, exclaiming familiarly,

“Good day, my princes!” and turning the heads of the animals homeward, the neighboring wood echoed with the crack! crack! of his

whip, and the rattle of the wheels soon died away in the distance.

Neither of our travellers had the distinguished rank which their late guide, in his exalted idea of their nobility, was pleased to bestow; but one, the taller and handsomest one of the two, held the rank of Colonel, and it may be truly said the dignity sat well upon him, for his exterior was at once commanding and noble. This officer we shall name Ludovic, and his companion Dorlay, who was his junior. Both were charged with a commission of importance from the Emperor Napoleon.

“Perhaps you do not entirely comprehend,” said Ludovic to the other, “my proper reason for dismissing the chaise so soon.”

“Why,” replied his companion, “for the very reason which you assigned, I suppose.”

“No, no, my friend; he might have conducted us by another more circuitous route if I had pleased, but the fact is I have an uncontrollable desire to tramp on foot these places rendered so dear to my memory by associations of no ordinary kind.”

“Associations,” replied his friend, “connected, I suppose, with some of those ugly wounds which you received in the Vendean war.”

“Yes, true; a war in which I lost my best friends, and two brothers, who would have been by this time an ornament to the service. I lost, too, my old father; veteran that he was—I think I see his grey locks straying in the wind, and his noble face lighted up with a smile of quenchless patriotism, on the fatal morning that made many a happy wife a widow ere night. And I, too—I should certainly have fallen a sacrifice to the insatiable thirst for blood displayed by our enemies; had it not been for the intercession of a beautiful young girl—an angel I might say—for, truly, never did I see so much virtue and heavenly intrepidity shown before for mortal man.”

“A woman, eh! Now, my friend, am I wrapt body and soul in thy story; let’s have it—by Jove! a woman —a charming young girl—an angel! proceed, my friend, proceed—all interest—all attention—oh, how I love to hear of female heroism!”

“Yes! but, unhappily, this lovely young creature was a native of La Vendee.”

“What matters!—prejudice, man, prejudice—talk not of national distinctions when a lovely young woman is in the case. Under any government, in any country, a woman should be equally respected; but come, tell us how this angel saved thee—a republican soldier.”

“Well, then, I’ll tell thee. You are aware that it was a war of extermination, when both parties were prodigal of their courage and daring. No prisoners were made, no quarter given, it was a fight for death; and I, with some others, during a skirmish, was desperately wounded, and left to the mercy or disposition of our captors. Mercy they had none; I was faint, miserable, apparently dying, and the officer commanding the company into whose hands I had fallen, in a cool relentless tone, ordered me to make my preparations for death in five minutes, at the same time turning round to his soldiers, gave the word for a file of men to advance twelve paces, and to put as many shots as they were able into my head; which order the men proceeded to obey, with a *sang froid* equal to that of their commander. I had but one care at that moment on my mind, and that was to think of the effect my miserable death was likely to have on the already shattered nerves of an aged parent. I uttered the name of my mother; and offered up a short prayer to heaven for her support, under the severe trial she might be expected to undergo in the loss of an only son. God bless her! she is now in heaven, I trust! (here the soldier dashed a large tear from his eye which he found it impossible to suppress.)

Ah!—well, my friend, I was about to tell thee—just at this critical moment, when I beheld the dark muzzles of the guns slowly rising to the (proper level, and in another moment a dozen shots would have

whistled through my brain—to the surprise of myself and every one else, a young girl ran forward, and breaking through the ranks of the stern soldiery, grasped the officer convulsively round the waist, and besought him to spare my life; these were her words—‘Brother! oh, my brother!—pardon him—oh, for mercy sake do not take his life—did you not hear him say, Mother!—yes, he has a mother—you too, have a mother. What would thy mother feel, if she were thus to lose thee? She would die; and would you kill his mother? Look!—see! he is bleeding—fainting; there, I see you relent, good brother!—dear brother! heaven has moved thy heart—go, he can no longer harm any of our people. Oh! how he bleeds!—mercy—mercy! Leave him—oh, leave him to die!’— *Mon brave!* excuse these tears, they are the first I have shed since that memorable morning. Well—you should have seen the dark looks of the soldiery—the grim smile—the knitted brows relax—the convulsive clutching at the muskets—aye! men who had never shed a tear, perhaps, before, shed them then—I shan’t easily forget it, comrade; so, to cut short the story, the girl melted her brother’s heart, which, being of iron, I’ll leave you to guess was no easy task, and which feat nothing but a woman’s tears could have accomplished. Oh! the efficacy of woman’s tears. The soldiers were drawn off, and I was left, not to die—as advised by my fair preserver—but by her assistance I reached a cottage, where my wounds were dressed; she dressed them—ah! there was magic in her touch; beautiful creature! how she watched me for weeks with the tenderest care. Aye, and she even found out to love me, too—yes, man, she loved me; and do you think that I could look upon so much excellence with an indifferent eye, do you? or an indifferent heart?”

“I should think a man callous, indeed, under such circumstances,” replied his companion.

“Callous!—a brute man; mine’s not a brute nature, no—I loved her, then—aye, with my whole soul I loved her. You know what succeeded to the events of that campaign. My military duties called me away; I have been absent five years. In yonder village, then, I left all my hopes; I swore to love her—and I have kept my word, and of my heart

its faith. On, then, comrade; let's to the goal of my hopes, if you value the happiness of a friend; I see you sympathize with me."

The two friends, after the lapse of half an hour, arrived at the entrance of the village. Ludovic pressed on with eager haste, literally dragging his companion under him, until they came to a certain spot indicated by our hero, where stood a cottage, beautifully situated in the midst of a clump of tall pines, whose dark tops cast down upon the simple dwelling beneath a rich vernal coloring, that gave to the scene an effect beautiful in the extreme. The two officers entered by a small wicker gate, and approached the entrance; the house presented a silent and somewhat melancholy aspect; there was the shaded porch vine-clad, lovely and luxuriant as ever, beneath which Ludovic had passed many hours of real happiness with young Annette. A venerable old man presented himself on their entrance; his grey locks gave him the appearance of a patriarch; his features were furrowed with the lines of age, and his figure stooped beneath the weight of years. He welcomed them, and bade the noble-looking strangers partake of his best cheer.

"There," said he, "I pray you, noble officers, to regale yourselves with our homely wine, and such substantial fare as my scanty larder will afford; for myself, you will excuse me when I tell you that my only child, a young woman of twenty, is pronounced to be in the last stage of a malady supposed incurable; the doctor of our village has just quitted her, and he says that she may not live till morning; therefore I..."

"Who not live till morning," interrupted Ludovic; "what Annette!—do you mean Annette?—tell me instantly—delay not an instant, St. Pierre! lead me to her." The young man was powerfully agitated; he seized the almost helpless old man by the arm, who gazed on him with looks of astonishment.

"Who are you, Sir, who are so familiar with our names? It cannot be!—no—not Ludovic, I'm sure! he was not so tall—not so sunburnt—true,

he was handsome," continued the old man, "but not so handsome as yourself; besides, your dress and all bespeak you of high rank."

"Good father!—lead me to Annette, I say; come, talk of identity afterward. I tell you I 've come to claim her; dying—nonsense—impossible! Why, man, I left her in the bloom of health."

"Well, my son, truly am I glad to see thee. Bless thy noble face! thou art altered, indeed! Aye, but I should know that scar;" here the officer pulled off the huge fur cap which had, until this moment, obscured the greater part of his visage. The action betrayed the remains of what had been a severe wound, apparently inflicted with a sabre, and which extended from the right temple downward to the depth of several inches. By this token the old man at once recognised the young soldier, who had been, by his daughter's interference, saved from inevitable death some years before. "Ah! my son," said he, after surveying him with an admiring gaze from head to foot, and giving a deep groan, "this is a sad return for thee. Why, we deemed you no more; and Annette, poor angel, has been pining away her existence for months past, under the impression that you had perished in the field. I fear thou hast arrived too late."

Here the young officer could restrain his impatience no longer, and casting aside his cloak and sword, and leaving the aged father to follow him as he best might, darted through an open door, and soon gained the sick chamber, where lay the tender object of his solicitude, seemingly insensible to any external approach. He drew near the bed—she slept; he leant over and imprinted one soft kiss on those lips, temptingly protruding; rubylike they presented themselves to his enraptured eyes, and before he had time to follow up the warm impulses of his heart, she awoke. Her looks wandered to where he stood; she looked not long—a warm glow spread over her features—then quickly subsiding, her face grew pale—paler than before; she looked again; she regarded the young man steadfastly—a gleam of intensely affectionate recollection lit up her face for an instant; she raised her delicate white hand from the coverlid as if to clasp his; the

young officer grasped it; he watched each change in her features as they varied alternately from rose to lily, with an earnestness that told how his soul was wrought up by the intensity of his emotions; he held her hand till at last he fancied it grew cold in his; she had closed her eyes; it would have been difficult at this moment to have told whose cheek was the paler of the two—that of her whose passive hand he held, or his own. He gazed on, while his heart scarcely owned a pulsation; mute—breathless—every faculty seemed suspended, each nerve paralysed; all was still—aye, still as the grave; her breast heaved not—no sigh escaped her —no visible sign of life.

Her venerable parent had seated himself beside the couch in an old carved chair, his face buried in his hands; his grey locks straying wildly down to his knees, and uttering from time to time a half-suppressed sob, that broke upon the ears of those present with startling effect. There is that in an old man's grief that gives to the heart more pain, conveys to the mind a more acute sense of heart-rending misery than any thing I know of. At the foot of the bed stood Dorlay, for he, too, had thrust himself into the scene, twirling his moustache with great rapidity—fumbling at the hilt of his sword, which every now and then he half withdrew from the scabbard, then as suddenly thrust it back, and giving many other symptoms of violent agitation. At last Ludovic was observed to hang over the form of the apparently dying girl; he whispered in her ear, such a whisper none could ever forget—low —distinct—he caught his breath, every one heard it— "Annette!" She opened her eyes; the effect was as though some magic had mingled itself in that one strained convulsive effort. She gazed on him; the sudden effect produced by his unexpected appearance had been too much for her, but the torpor in which she had lain, and which had been mistaken for the sleep of death, gradually wore off, and, to the astonishment and nameless joy of all interested, Annette awoke to life!— to love! Where all was tears and sorrow, now all is smiles and happiness.

Colonel Ludovic and his friend got rid of the despatches with which they were entrusted, and having obeyed the commands of the

Emperor, returned to the village. A few mornings after the circumstances just narrated, all the inhabitants were like people beside themselves, in their demonstration of the pleasure felt on the occasion of a bridal of so generally interesting a nature, that not a heart among them but could say their joy was his. That day had witnessed the consummation of a noble young soldier's fondest hopes.

THE LADY'S WORLD OF FASHION. 1842.